

# *Sharing* **Children**

AT THE HOLIDAYS

BY TAMMY DAUGHTRY



**I love looking at old fashioned photo albums, the ones with the peel-back plastic and the yellowed pages.**

The timeless memories stand still in the smiles, the family gatherings, and especially all the years of Thanksgiving around the table, elbow to elbow as we gathered and always had more people than space. We truly wanted to be “together” so we wiggled and scooped our way in so we could hold hands, share what we were thankful for, and then dig into the many platters and bowls of turkey, stuffing, gravy, and three versions of cranberries (to keep each of my uncles happy). Those are beautiful and meaningful memories that have been engraved on my heart for decades.


**W**hen I look back and remember the big holidays, I also remember who was missing. Every other year, one of my cousins was not there because she rotated the “big holidays” with her other parent after her mom and dad were divorced. I also rotated back and forth between grandparents because my mom and dad had been divorced since I was very young. There were great experiences sometimes with double the food, double the love, and especially when I received double the presents. However, there was also a part of sharing holidays that came with a price; I was the one who always had to leave in the middle of the weekend or the big family get-together.

I often felt like I was “on the clock,” and if I spent less time with one side of the family than the other, then I had to always “balance the scales.” I remember hearing, “You were at your other grandparents’ house for six hours yesterday; why can’t you stay here longer?” As a child I can remember being confused and a bit frustrated because no matter how much time I was at each side of the family’s gatherings, no one ever felt satisfied. It seemed that a relative was often mentioning how “we never see you; why can’t you stay longer?” To be honest, I always tried to appease everyone and keep people happy, no matter how stressful it was for me.

I remember thinking it was not fair that everyone else got to hang out and enjoy the longer visit while I went back and forth, back and forth. As a kid none of it made sense to me.

### *To make the holidays less stressful for children whose parents are no longer married, here are 19 ideas that I wish my divorced parents could have learned from a trusted counselor:*

- ★ **Your child loves everyone**, and sometimes he or she feels caught in the middle between families.
- ★ **Your child doesn’t want to disappoint anyone**, and it’s not his or her job to keep track of the time or being “on the clock.”
- ★ **When grandparents or extended family say negative words about the “ex,”** it is very hurtful to the child.
- ★ **Traditions can be enjoyed on any day**; don’t get stressed about the calendar.
- ★ **Kids will benefit from fun and meaningful traditions** and carry the “memory” with them no matter when the events happen.
- ★ **Kids will look back and remember who made it hard on them** or got angry about the “parenting time” being unfair or not how they wanted it to be.
- ★ **Divided parents need to talk** and plan things out without the children listening or observing.
- ★ **Kids do not need to hear negative details** about the other parent.
- ★ **Kids need help with preparing gifts for their other parent**, and it is hurtful when divorced parents make this an opportunity to be unkind.
- ★ **If a child is new in a stepfamily**, he or she may need some time to warm up to all the new extended family that comes with the new relationship.
- ★ **In a new stepfamily, sometimes the “step-grandparents” treat their biological grandchildren with more favor and give them more expensive gifts.** They might have the tendency to overlook the grandchildren that are not their biological connection. (For stepparents, try to be proactive and get your parents to be equally kind and thoughtful in gift giving so your stepchildren don’t get accidentally forgotten or overlooked.)
- ★ **When a parent gives a child a gift, the child may not understand why he or she can’t take it back and forth between the two homes.** Consider letting children enjoy their toys and new gifts no matter what house they are in. (Some kids end up feeling like they are a “pawn” in a game because parents argue and fight over every little item and who bought it — even clothing, water bottles, lunch boxes, and backpacks. This generates undo stress for children.)
- ★ **If possible, purchase age-appropriate books that explain the meaning of the holiday** (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter) and give the child a copy at both Mom’s house and Dad’s house.
- ★ **When it is time to exchange children to the “other parent,” be mindful of your facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language** with the intent to give your child complete freedom and support to leave your side of the family and go enjoy the other side. “Emotional permission” to go and enjoy their other family is a true gift you can give them as a single parent or stepparent.



★ **Making a big deal about presents and trying to “outdo” each other is not helpful.**

★ **Allow your children to have a photo of their other parent in your home as a tangible way to allow them to love everyone.** It can be in their bedroom in a place you don't have to see it, but it can truly help them process missing the other parent. Having a photo with them or a stuffed animal (or comfort item) to hug at nighttime is a very kind offering that helps their divided hearts feel less broken.

★ **When it's your turn to be without your children, make a fun plan for yourself so your children won't worry about your well-being.** Make plans so the alone time doesn't catch you off guard. The healthier you are when they are away, the healthier you will be when they return. Being sad is appropriate, but letting sadness overwhelm you or lead you to unhealthy coping mechanisms only creates a pattern of pain for yourself, thus impacting your children upon their return.

★ **Kids need "freedom to love everyone" 365 days a year;** this "gift of peace" is more valuable to them than anything tangible or expensive and will reap lifelong rewards as they grow into young adults.

★ **Speak kindly about all of their family.** Allow kids to talk about their other grandparents and aunts, uncles, and cousins because their extended family is still part of their story, even if their parents are no longer married. Allowing them to celebrate all the people who love them is a Christlike gift that will stay with them forever.



**S**haring kids is not easy for divorced and remarried parents. It's also not easy for kids. When the loving adults (parents and grandparents) help ease the burden for children, there can still be beautiful memories made at special times each year. And don't forget to print the digital photos and put them in old fashioned albums so kids can enjoy them over and over! Archiving life for decades to come will keep your children's memories strong and beautiful as they grow into young adults and become parents themselves. Divided parents can raise amazing children, even if it's complicated. They can still thrive!

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